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'Mr. Citizen' Speaks Up

Truman Tells Peril in Delayed Decisions

(This is the ninth of 10 articles excerpted from "Mr. Citizen," newly-published book in which former President Truman reveals his thoughts and opinions on many of the vital issues and key figures of our times.)

By HARRY S. TRUMAN

The most dangerous a president can follow in a time of crisis is to defer making decisions until they are forced on him and thereupon become inevitable decisions. Events then get out of hand and take control of the president, and he is compelled to overcome situations which he should have prevented. When a president finds himself in that position, he is no longer a leader but an improviser

who is driven to action out of expediency or weakness.

In normal times, lack of presidential leadership may be harmless, though it can hardly be considered a national asset. But in times of crisis, irresoluteness on the part of a president can do the nation great harm. It can, in fact, damage a situation beyond anyone's ability to overcome it later. I have often thought that if the three presidents preceding Lincoln -- Buchanan, Pierce and Fillmore -- had acted as they should have, it is more than likely that the war between the states might have been avoided.

Not only must a president be fully informed but he must be constantly alert to what lies ahead. And he can see ahead only if he has a sense of history and understands the times he lives in.

No Regrets

I have been asked whether I have any regrets about any of the major decisions I had to make as president. I have none. And there were many things that had to be done that might have been handled some other way. But considering the information available at the time and the circumstances prevailing when I had to make many of my decisions, I do not see how I could have acted very differently.

A man can find more time to contemplate a situation after it has come about. Looking at the results, he might wonder why it could not have been handled differently. But whenever I felt a mistake had been made, I always tried to remedy the mistake by making another decision. Everybody makes mistakes and the important thing is to correct them, in which case you try to take the course that is likely to bring the least harm.

Look Ahead

I am not one who believes it does any good to cry over past mistakes. You have got to keep looking ahead and going straight ahead all the time, making decisions and correcting the situation as you go along. This calls for a fundamental policy, a basic outlook, for the making of major foreign and domestic decisions. Otherwise the operations of the government would be reduced to improvisation -- and inevitable trouble. A president who hesitates or temporizes usually is not certain of what he wants, and he is greatly handicapped when he has to act without a clearcut policy.

A president ought not to worry whether a decision he knows he has to make will prove to be popular. The ques-

tion is not whether his actions are going to be popular at the time but whether what he does is right. And if it is right in the long run it will come out all right. The man who keeps his ear to the ground to find out what is popular will be in trouble. I usually say that a man whose heart is in the right place and who is informed is not likely to go very far wrong when he has to act.

Of course, each president has his own way of dealing with matters that confront him. The mental habits of a president are as influential as any of the other factors which impel him to make the kind of decision he makes and the swiftness with which he acts. I found myself constantly absorbed in what was pending, from the time I arose until I went to bed. In bed I would try to read something in history which might help me form an opinion as to the course I had to take.

Good Listener

That is the nature of the presidency, and it is impossible to detach yourself from constant preoccupation with it. But when I went to sleep, I did not carry my burdens with me, so that I was able to start refreshed in the morning.

A president's performance

depends a great deal on the information he has and the information he is able to get. I sought the background of every important question that confronted me. I talked with people interested in the welfare of the country who could give me their viewpoint exactly as they thought and believed, no matter what they thought my own opinion was on a particular subject. And frank opinions were hard to get. Too many people tried to find out what I wanted to hear and then gave it to me. But the people I wanted around me did not do that.

I made it my business as president to listen to people in all walks of life, and in all fields of endeavor and experience. I did not see only the people who ought to be seen -- that is, those who were "well connected." I always tried to be a good listener. But since the responsibility for making decisions had to be mine, I always reserved judgment.

CIA Purpose

The reason that led me to set up the Central Intelligence agency was to make sure that all the vast amount of information available to the different departments of the government would be co-ordinated and made immediately available to the president -- without being edited or interpreted by any one department.

When a crisis came along such as the one connected with Gen. MacArthur or the Berlin airlift or the aggression against Korea, I was confronted with making far-reaching decisions. Once I made up my mind, I acted. And I did not worry about the action I took. If you are going to walk the floor and worry yourself to death every time you have to make a decision, or if you fail to make up your mind,

(Contd.)

I am frequently asked how much a president depends upon advice and directions from his cabinet or staff or military leaders or advisers. I always point out that it is absolutely essential for a president to have information and advice. But he does not take directions, because it is the president's responsibility alone to give directions.

great leaders of the world reached decisions. As I look at some of the great decisions of the past, I am inclined to believe, that the leaders who made them possessed an almost intuitive sense of the future. Their greatness lay in the fact that they could see further ahead than any of the others around them—further than any of their contemporaries.

I think much of the greatness of our nation has been achieved as a result of the leaders we have had. The wisdom of the framers of the Constitution is apparent, I think, in their vision of the future. And every one of our presidents who rose to greatness had the gift of projecting himself into the future.

I am not suggesting, of course, that a man can antici-

pate with any degree of certainty what the future holds in store for any man or any nation. But the actions of a wise leader can and often do have a profound influence on the future.

From the book "Mr. Citizen," published by Bernard Geis Associates, copyright 1960, by Harry S. Truman.